

At the end of April the siege of Jerusalem commenced. Titus built platforms for his artillery, which then proceeded to pour missiles against the city walls, concentrating their fire at a weak spot in the wall just outside the hill known as Calvary, or Golgotha. The battering rams were brought up and put into action; during the occasional lulls, Titus sent his friend and collaborator Joseph, the renegade Jewish commander, to harangue the rebels with lengthy speeches outlining the hopelessness of their cause in the face of the assembled might of the Roman Empire. Both Joseph and the rams were met with rocks and shouts of defiance from the defenders. But after fifteen days, the outermost (third) wall was breached on May 7. Then, four days later, the second wall fell, too, though the first wave of Roman attackers who poured through the breach were beaten back by the Jewish militia.

At this point, Titus attempted to awe the rebels into submission by staging a four-day pay-parade, with his massive lines of troops assembled in full battle gear to receive their pay. This gambit met with a resounding lack of success, and so the siege resumed with the construction of four more artillery platforms aimed at the Antonia fortress and the Temple district. To provide wood for the siegeworks, Titus ordered the leveling of all the groves and orchards in a ten-mile radius around Jerusalem. "Truly the very view itself was a melancholy thing," observed Joseph; "for those places which were before adorned with trees and pleasant gardens, were now become a desolate country every way, and its trees were all cut down; nor could any foreigner that had formerly seen Judea and the most beautiful suburbs of the city, and now saw it as a desert, but lament and mourn sadly at so great a change, for the war had laid all the signs of beauty quite to waste."

Inside the holy city, the shortage of food had become critical. In normal times, the population of Jerusalem numbered about a hundred twenty thousand; but now, packed as it was with refugees, pilgrims,

and soldiers, there were probably four or five times that many. (Part of the Jewish Christian community, however, had apparently left Jerusalem in 68 for the more promising confines of the town of Pella on the east bank of the Jordan.) Those who were fortunate enough to obtain edible grain often failed to take time to grind it before wolfing it down; loaves of bread were snatched half-baked out of the oven. Roaming bands of vigilantes searched for hidden caches of provisions; when they came across a locked house, they broke down the doors on the assumption that the owners had found something to eat. Anyone who hoarded food was beaten or—in the case of women—had their hair chopped off as a warning to others. As the famine deepened, corpses of men, women, and children who had starved to death were thrown over the city wall into the ditch below; even Titus was appalled by the stench from the decomposing bodies.

Every day the gnawing hunger spawned hundreds of desertions, but the runaways found no mercy in the Roman camp. Instead, Titus ordered them tortured and then crucified in full view of the city walls, in another vain attempt to frighten the defenders into surrendering. All his stupid brutality accomplished, though, was to convince the rebels that they might as well die a hero's death fighting as meet a shameful end on the cross. According to Joseph, the defenders shouted down to Titus that they preferred death to slavery, and that "they would do all possible damage to the Romans while they had breath in them. . . . As for the Sanctuary, God had a better one in the world itself, but this one too would be saved by Him who dwelt in it."

Over the course of three days in July, the Romans encompassed the city with a wall of their own, to protect the artillery and cut off all chance of escape for the rebels. As they worked, the legionaries flaunted their abundant provisions in front of the starving garrison. In the streets of Jerusalem, meanwhile, bodies of the famished elderly lay scattered in heaps, and even the living walked about like shadows. Some of John's Galileans broke into the storerooms of the Temple to steal the sacred wine and oil normally reserved for the sacrificial offerings to God. It made little difference; by this time, Titus had approached so close to the Temple that the daily sacrifice had to be abandoned, a tragedy for devout Jews everywhere.

Near the end of July, Titus captured the Antonia fortress.

Roman progress remained painfully slow, however, hampered by the legions' frustrating difficulty in fighting their way through the

city's narrow, winding passageways. Somehow the process had to be accelerated. And though Titus—whose mistress was Berenice, the sister of the Jewish monarch Agrippa II—appears to have genuinely regretted the military necessity of destroying the Temple, that is precisely what he decided he must do next.

First the Roman battering rams pounded on the thick Temple gates of cypress and silver for several days, to no apparent effect. Then the attackers set up ladders and tried to scale the colonnade walls, but the Jews easily threw them back. So Titus ordered the Temple doors set afire. The blaze burned steadily, and on the second day the desperate defenders emerged and launched a counterattack. In the ensuing melee, a Roman soldier thrust a torch through an open window and started a conflagration that, with the aid of more Roman firebrands, quickly spread through the interior of the Temple. Hundreds, perhaps thousands of Jews were burned to death in the ensuing holocaust; among the victims were the disciples of a self-proclaimed messiah who had all crowded together in one of the colonnades, apparently seeking divine deliverance from the impending catastrophe. As the sanctuary crumbled, the Roman troops plundered what they could carry and indiscriminately killed as many Jews as they could find. Then they set fire to the remaining outer sections of the Temple, until the whole magnificent edifice came crashing to the ground.

Thus was the holy house of God destroyed, and even Joseph mourned.

After offering sacrifices to the gods of Rome amid the smoldering rubble of the Temple, Titus cleaned up—with a notable absence of mercy—the remaining pockets of resistance in the Lower and Upper City. Then, in September, he turned his attention to the underground vaults where thousands of Jews, rebels and innocent civilians, had taken refuge. They were brought to the surface and herded together in a detention camp while Titus decided what to do with them; by this time, even the legions were weary of butchering Jews, though while Titus deliberated, several thousand of his prisoners died of starvation. John of Gischala surrendered at once; his haste won him his life. Simon ben Gorias, who held out longer, was less fortunate. Taken to Rome and put on display as a sort of victory trophy, he was subsequently executed.

The siege of Jerusalem had lasted for a hundred and thirty-nine days. Although no one could ever obtain an accurate count of the casualties, at least several hundred thousand Jews had perished from

hunger, disease, or wounds. When the survivors were rounded up, Titus executed the old and sick, along with those who had taken an active role in the fighting (informants helped the Romans identify these). The tallest and most handsome young men were shipped off to Rome to march in Titus' triumphal procession, along with several of the most precious Jewish relics salvaged from the Temple, including the seven-branched candelabrum known as the menorah. To commemorate the victory, the Senate built the Arch of Titus in the Roman Forum, with depictions of the sacred trophies inscribed on the massive stone. The rest of the able-bodied Jewish survivors were sent to Egypt in chains, as slaves; those who were left were either sold or presented as gifts to provincial officials, to serve as fodder for wild animals in gladiatorial shows. Titus himself kept several thousand prisoners for the celebration of his brother Domitian's birthday at Caesarea Maritima; according to Joseph, more than twenty-five hundred Jews perished on that awful day in the arena, or at the stake. Joseph, however, received for his services a gift of sacred books and a pardon for several hundred of his relatives and friends. He returned to Rome with Titus, became a Roman citizen, changed his name to Flavius Josephus, and received a pension from Vespasian for the rest of his life. In his later years he recorded the grim events of the fall of Jerusalem in his history *Wars of the Jews*, the only eyewitness account of the tragedy to survive the ravages of time.

Before he left Judea, Titus ordered the complete demolition of Jerusalem. All that remained of the holy city thereafter was a stretch of wall on the western side, to protect the local Roman garrison, and the three towers of Herod's palace. "Not its great antiquity," wrote Josephus, "nor its vast riches, nor the diffusion of its nation over all the habitable earth, nor the greatness of the veneration paid to it on a religious account, [had] been sufficient to preserve it from being destroyed."

A year or so later, the fortress of Machaerus—where Herod Antipas had imprisoned and executed John the Baptist—fell to the Romans. Now only Masada remained.

Dominating the desert wilderness on the eastern edge of the Dead Sea, perched high atop a mesa (approximately two thousand by one thousand feet) whose slopes ran almost straight down and disappeared into dizzying ravines ("There is nothing but destruction in case your feet slip," someone pointed out, rather unnecessarily), Masada presented an intriguing problem in siege warfare. Inside the Herodian



Jewish war captives carrying booty, including the menorah, from the Temple (From the Arch of Titus, Rome)